Can There Be a Subaltern Middle Class? Notes on African American and *Dalit* History

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The history of the middle-class idea has been elaborated for the most part in the light of the western European and North American experience — the "classical" cases, as they say.[1] This essay asks whether the burdens and expectations of the middle classes have been qualitatively different in the Asian and African colonies of Europe, and in postcolonial societies generally, once middling strata in these societies come to be recognized as a distinct entity, with the historically assigned task of carrying their people into modernity and a regime of human rights and equal opportunity. It then analyzes the particular political and psychological challenges that come with the emergence of an ex-slave or ex-untouchable middle class, such as the "black bourgeoisie" in the United States or the *dalit* (ex-untouchable) elite in India.[2]

1. See, e.g., Peter Stearns, "Middle Class: Toward a Precise Definition," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 21 (1979): 377–96; Stuart M. Blumin, "The Hypothesis of Middle-Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America: A Critique and Some Proposals," *American Historical Review* 90 (1985): 299–338; Jürgen Kocka, "The Middle Classes in Europe," *Journal of Modern History* 67 (1995): 783–806; Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, 1780–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

2. I need hardly say that I use the term *ex-slave* here in a figurative rather than a literal sense. Obviously, not all members of the African American middle classes come from a slave background; many are descended from families of free and even middle-class black immigrants. Equally, the *dalit* groups whose middle-class elements I write about were rarely slaves in a technical sense. For my purposes, it is important to note, however, that an increasingly popular account of the foundation of the United States is built around an acknowledgment of the "original sin" of slavery, the recognition

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In the following pages I trace the idea of the middle class or "middle-classness" as it travels, and mutates in its travels, from the earlier examples of western Europe and North America in the nineteenth century to the Asian and African colonies of the European powers in the twentieth century, where powerful anticolonial movements were led by the self-described "Western-educated middle classes." I mark the differences that emerge in the history of middle-classness in its journey between these two points and then examine certain "subaltern" middle classes (middle-class groups that emerge from, and remain in various ways closely tied to, long-stigmatized lower-class and underclass populations) in India and the United States. I note the unexpected convergences and parallel conundrums that characterize the struggles of the subaltern middle classes in both locations, in spite of the markedly different histories of the two countries and of the diverse subaltern groups in them.

A word of clarification is necessary. This essay does not seek to compare the African American and *dalit* experience writ large or to establish some sort of equivalence between them. Nor does it attempt to trace the interconnections between the African American and *dalit* movements and the ideas, inspirations, and symbols that may have flowed either way. Again, it is not primarily concerned with "minorities" and their exclusion from national mainstreams: otherwise, Muslims in India and Latinas/Latinos and others in the United States would have a larger presence in the following pages, as would Barack Obama's election as forty-fourth president of the United States in 2008. What the essay focuses on, instead, are specific assemblages that are seen historically (but also, somehow, "inevitably," "by definition") as communities of lower-class and underclass individuals and families; and what happens to members of these "communities" who inhabit, or come to inhabit, not the positions of the down-and-out — where they allegedly belong — but those of the more comfortable, educated, often professional middle classes.[3] Thus it asks what the history of their struggles tells us

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and overcoming of which underscore the story of American democracy and liberty. There is a parallel story regarding untouchability in the received narrative of Indian democracy. For important general statements on the African American and *dalit* middle classes, see E. Franklin Frazier, *The Black Bourgeoisie* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957); Bart Landry, *The New Black Middle Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Harold Isaacs, *India's Ex-Untouchables* (New York: Harper, 1964); Sacchidanand, *The Harijan Elite: A Study of the Status, Networks, Mobility, and Role in Social Transformation* (Delhi: Thomson, 1976); and Nandu Ram, *The Mobile Scheduled Castes: Rise of a New Middle Class* (Delhi: Hindustan, 1988).

3. It is necessary to stress that the "educated, professional middle class" position was in the twentieth century the major aspiration and avenue of advancement for the widest sections of the lower classes, American blacks and Indian *dalit*s included. As E. Franklin Frazier put it, "Educa-

about the limits of the middle-class idea and about the conditions necessary for the consolidation of particular groups as middle-class, modern, and unmarked.

The middle class or classes have been something of a privileged category in modern society, precisely because the people so described remain unmarked, supposedly nonpolitical, and in significant ways even invisible—"a class paradoxically bound together by its 'common embrace of an ideology of social atomism' and prone to 'express its awareness of its common attitudes and beliefs as a denial of the significance of class.' "[4] Consciously or unconsciously, the middle classes are often regarded as the quintessence of "modern," "respectable" living, with the absence of an explicit (or "vulgar") collective politics being taken as one sign of respectability. These are individuals and families who supposedly pursue their private interests quietly in well-designated public and private spaces, while the task of organizing and ordering the society is taken over and managed by "experts," themselves ordinary middle-class individuals in another capacity.

This privileging of the middle-class idea flows at least in part from its claimed universality. At times, as in England in the nineteenth century or India in the first half of the twentieth, the term *middle-class* referred pejoratively to upstart bourgeois, the uncultured and frequently migrant nouveaux riches, who attempted to mimic upper-class practices and manners. In the longer run, however, middle-classness came to be seen as the wave of the future and the middle classes as the makers of their own (as well as of the wider, modern society's) destiny—a destiny made through an individual's, as well as a people's, own unaided efforts. To be middle-class could even be described as the common aspiration of all "modern" groups and individuals. The ideal society would be a society in which no one had the benefit of aristocratic wealth or the afflictions of inherited poverty. The emergence and strength of the middle classes appeared to be the measure of human equality, of the possibility of self-fashioning, of individual achievement and capability—the very signs of the modern.

It is merit, not inherited wealth or privilege, or sectional loyalty or networks, that counts in the making of the middle-class world, we are told. It is improvement, and self-improvement, through education and moral reform, individual effort, and sheer determination that brings advancement for society, family, and individual.

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tion is the chief means by which the Negro escapes from the masses into the middle class" (*The Negro Family in the United States*, rev. ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966], 331).

4. Amy Schrager Lang, *The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 10, quoting Blumin, "Hypothesis of Middle-Class Formation," 305, 309.

The rags-to-riches tale, great men building fortunes out of nothing, is a staple of the middle-class fable not only in the United States but also in Victorian England and colonial India. *Anyone* can be middle-class, and in a sense, *everyone* should be. Those who do not make it are simply not determined or talented enough. The urge to "make it" and the promise of its possibility are the transparent, evident signs of the modern and the good society.[5]

At the same time, middle-classness — like the modern — has always been defined by a series of exclusions: in other words, by what it is not. Central among these, although not always recognized as clearly as they should be, have been exclusions based on ideas of race, gender, and religion. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, the emerging middle classes marked themselves as distinct from the nobility by the fact that they earned their wealth and position through hard work. By contrast with the old aristocracy, obsessed with questions of heredity and blood, the "assertive new middling orders" of this rapidly industrializing, turbulent, and profit-seeking society were deeply concerned with what they saw as their health and fitness, both physical and moral.[6] Similarly, in the context of new and increasingly successful imperial ventures, sections of the English middle class lined up against other "degrading" and "immoral" practices — against slavery, for example, and *for* temperance, and even in a kind of "feminist" challenge, in the form of an "enlightened" middle-class stand against sati, child marriage, and so on — thus constituting and claiming a new sensibility and a new political position in the nineteenth century.[7]

On the one hand, the middle classes were distinguished from manual workers by the professions they entered (occupations in which they did not soil their hands through labor), the houses they lived in, the language they spoke, and their temperate behavior.[8] On the other, and this was as critical, they were distinguished

5. "In democracies," as the sociologist Akos Rona-Tas puts it, "the middle class is the nation proper. The typical member of a national community is a member of the middle class" ("Post Communist Transition and the Absent Middle Class in Central East Europe," quoted in Sam Vaknin, "Russia's Middle Class," December 18, 2002, samvak.tripod.com/brief-middleclass01.html).

6. See Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 22; and J. V. Pickstone, "Establishment and Dissent in Nineteenth-Century Medicine: An Exploration of Some Correspondence and Connections between Religious and Medical Belief Systems in Early Industrial England," in *The Church and Healing*, ed. W. J. Sheils (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 169–70.

7. See Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); and Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 433–34.

8. It is ironic, then, that in some countries today, like the United States, and more generally among groups I call the subaltern middle classes, anyone, working-class or professional, who holds a

by a notion of malehood in which the man was the breadwinner and presided over a household with a clearly separated private domain inhabited by "nonworking" women and children. Middle-class men claimed political rights and the status of citizens: the exclusion of workers and women was long seen as being entirely natural. It was only in later discourses of citizenship and middle-classness — such as those represented in the women's movement — that this kind of exclusion came to be challenged.

The housewife as the linchpin of domesticity and the private sphere was largely a creation of this new middle-class world and thus was integrated into it. Along with laboring peoples and the aristocracy, "nonwhites" and the "Third World" in general were, however, seen to lie outside the domain of new middle-class life. Catholics, the Jews, and the Irish, to take a motley crew, would not be recognized as middle-class in England for a long time, nor would Jews, Italians, or Irish in North America. Native Americans and African Americans in the United States and *dalit*s in India are not always easily accommodated in the category to this day.

These exclusions are not explicable in terms of the "common sense" middle-class proposition that these latter groups — "immigrants," "Negroes," "natives," "untouchables," "criminal castes," "Red Indians," and *adivasis* (the last two applied to the indigenous communities of North America and South Asia, respectively) — were inherently poor, disorganized, and lazy, culturally unsuited to middle-class modernity. To make sense of them, we need to recall not the middle-class fable of liberal advancement in lands of the free but the destruction and alienation that attended the establishment of modern industrial society and imperialism, along with the economic and technological advances and promises of unprecedented opportunity and wealth that came with them.[9]

The effects of this dislocation and alienation have been marked among the working classes and immigrant populations, themselves made up in the main of uprooted working people. They may be seen in the history of several immigrant

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steady job and even temporarily occupies a position of intellectual, civic, or political leadership, can be thought of as middle-class.

9. For a few important commentaries, see Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Colonialism* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Press, n.d.); Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1982); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1963); Jean Suret-Canale, *French Colonialism in Tropical Africa, 1900–1945*, trans. Till Gottheiner (New York: Pica, 1971); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990).

groups in western Europe and North America from the later nineteenth century to the present. And they have of course had long-lasting consequences in Europe's Asian and African colonies and in the condition of the internally colonized (indigenous peoples in Australia and North America, African Americans in the United States, *dalit*s in India, etc.): that is, among populations marked out as subordinate on the basis of race, religion, or other inherited social condition and denied access for that reason to a whole range of public economic and cultural resources. How do these exclusions and dislocations affect the history of middle-class elements emerging from these groups?

The Colonized Middle Class

In his study of the making of the English middle class, Dror Wahrman contends that the idea or, more accurately, "talk" of the middle class — middling sorts, middle strata, middling people — was around for a fairly long time before the sociological category came into being.[10] The reference was to somewhat indistinct middling elements, with no clear cohesiveness or sense of mission. It was slowly, and imperceptibly, that the middling strata came to be recognized, and to recognize themselves, as an assemblage described as middle-class. One might even go a step farther. It is only in retrospect that a clear idea of a new class called the middle class (or classes), with its own historical destiny and duty, comes to be established, at both the discursive and the sociological levels — if indeed we can separate the two.

The classical or ideal-type middle class came into existence, then, unheralded and unannounced, by a process of molecular change, side by side with, and as part of, the development of the modern world. In this respect, its birth would appear to have been rather different from that of the industrial working class — thrown into being precipitously, pushed into homogenized conditions over which the great number of newly proletarianized workers had little choice. This transformation was accompanied apparently by some clarity about the end of an old world and the beginning of a new. Hence E. P. Thompson's insightful statement about the English working class being present at its own making.[11]

In this matter of previous announcement, and of visibility from (if not before) birth, lies the first major difference between the middle classes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and those of their Asian and African colonies. Whereas

10. Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class*.
11. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966).

the original (European) middle class gradually appeared in the local society, without fanfare, almost unknown to itself, in the colonies of Asia and Africa—dragged into "modernity" (as we are told) by the new forces of history—the *idea* of a middle class, and of the modern world that supposedly accompanied it, arrived fully formed, as it were. The challenge for the colonized, and for those who feared being colonized (like the Japanese in the nineteenth century), was to catch up with the purported metropolitan achievement—by racing toward nationhood, rational bureaucratic organization, industrial growth, and a middle-class society.[12]

In this instance, the middle-class idea preceded any social assemblage that might conform to it. It arrived in the form of a normative ideal, the attainment of which was said to be crucial to the development of a new society and a place in the modern world. The middle classes and the modern hardly tiptoed onto the stage of history in these "latecomer" nations. On the contrary, their approach was announced with a flourish, and a fierce and widely publicized struggle was required before the modern, the middle class, and the nation came into their own.

All over this colonized world, the modern middle classes have been men and women of ideas: thinkers, planners, activists, leaders, people intent on changing social arrangements and the conditions of social existence for the better, as they thought. The world of ideas—and the capacity of ideas to transform the world—has been important to the members of the middle classes, even when these men and women have not been intellectuals or activists: hence the integral connection of the middle classes with the idea of modernity and the *making* of the modern world. They speak for society, they represent the future, they *are* the society of the future and, to that extent, the only section deserving of the name

12. For a few relevant studies, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed, 1986); Hamza Alavi, "Pakistan and Islam: Ethnicity and Ideology," in *State and Ideology in the Middle East and Pakistan*, ed. Fred Halliday and Hamza Alavi (London: Macmillan, 1988), 64–111; Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); James S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist* (London: Heinemann, 1984); Michael Oliver West, *The Rise of an African Middle Class: Colonial Zimbabwe, 1898–1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); *The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1957); and Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

"society."[13] This has unusual consequences for the history of the middle classes that arrived late — in the colonized countries of Asia and Africa, as well as those that emerged among ex-slave populations in ex-colonies that are the main subject of this essay.

One of these has to do with the divided or double consciousness of the colonized. "It is a peculiar sensation," as W. E. B. DuBois so brilliantly put it in his meditation on the history of American blacks, "this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." Part of the struggle of the colonial middle classes, like that of African Americans, must be to "merge [this] double self into a better and truer self."[14]

There was another burden the latecomers had to bear. As they announced their struggle and their arrival, the middle classes in the colony spoke not only for themselves or for some abstract universal — the work ethic, merit, temperance, progress — but also for their people, who had been marked as "backward" and whom the educated middle classes had to represent and lead into the modern. While they may still have claimed to represent the universal and to speak for humanity (or "modern civilization"), the colonial middle classes spoke loudly and "vulgarly" for their particular segment of humanity, going on in many instances to claim the right of national independence on their behalf.

Given the naturalization of nation and nation-state in the course of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, however, this need to represent a parochial interest is not necessarily a long-term handicap. In the proposed national space, or the achieved nation-state (where the national becomes the natural and hence invisible), the colonial middle classes can become the unmarked universal again — the "mainstream" of modern, national development. The adjectival marker (Indian, Malaysian, Nigerian, South African, not unlike English, French, Italian, or Japanese) comes to be primarily a culturally neutral geographic identification.

This anonymity is not available to the internally colonized, or what might be called the "marked" or "subaltern" middle classes in the postcolony: the black middle class in the United States or the *dalit* middle class in India, for example. These sections of the broader middle class emerge at a third stage, as one might

13. For more on the Indian example, see Sudhir Chandra, *The Oppressive Present: Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* (London: Hurst, 2001); and Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

14. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 45.

describe it, usually some time *after* the establishment of national independence or of democracy. They appear, when they do, under the sign of a double colonization and labor under their own special yoke.

In the postcolony as in the colony, a violence — institutionalized in practices of racism, slavery, untouchability — serves to maintain the boundaries between racially or socially segregated communities.[15] Numerous studies of the African American middle classes have shown how black middle-class areas in most large American cities still remain bound in segregated black communities. In some instances, where black middle-class elements have moved out of traditionally black neighborhoods, their relocation has been followed by the phenomenon of "white flight" from the areas they have moved into, leading to the establishment of separate white and black neighborhoods once again.[16] Even where this is not so obviously the case in physical terms, as might be claimed for *dalit* professionals (smaller in number than their African American counterparts and less easily distinguished by skin color or physical appearance), it tends to be the social-psychological condition under which the ex-slave middle classes have to live and find their being.[17]

The violence referred to above is encountered not only in the physical and sexual abuse, rape, and flogging of lower-caste and lower-class servants and workers, and not only in "riots" and police violence against blacks and *dalit*s. It is found, too, in the upper-caste desertion of neighborhoods, clubs, schools, public transport, and sometimes even jobs into which the lower castes have been allowed entry. It is found in actions against affirmative action, in the courts and the legislatures as well as on the streets, and in the continued abuse and punishment of *dalit*s, blacks, and other such subaltern elements for appearing where they are still not expected to be. The African American addition to the list of cognizable offenses related to drinking and driving in the United States (not only DUI, "driving under the influence," and DWI, "driving while intoxicated," but also DWB, "driving while black"), and the Native American version of it (in which DWI becomes "driving while Indian"), is a profound comment on the necessity of

15. As Paul Gilroy notes, this is a situation in which the lines between public and private violence have often been very hard to draw (*Black Atlantic*, 175).

16. For two important recent studies, see Mary Patillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

17. See Darryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880–1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

being "white" to access fully the resources and opportunities of modern civic existence in many parts of the world.

It is the issue of double consciousness and the blurred lines between public and private, overt and covert, violence that I attend to in the remainder of this essay. I do so through a brief consideration of aspects of the *dalit* middle class's struggle in contemporary India, a struggle that returns to the question, am I *dalit*, or am I middle-class? Are ex-slaves/ex-untouchables allowed to be middle-class? Can they allow themselves to be middle-class? The violence and the double consciousness lodged in these questions may be demonstrated in a wide range of arenas. I take up two for analysis here: the question of political constituency (whom the subaltern middle classes might speak for) and the matter of "passing," which in the case of the *dalit*s in India often takes the form of a struggle over naming oneself and one's family.

The Question of Community; or, Appropriate Constituency

Early in 2001 a *dalit* columnist began writing a weekly column titled "Samasyaen *Dalit*on Ki" ("The Problems of the *Dalit*s") in a major Hindi daily published from New Delhi. The following examination of the issue of "appropriate" political constituency or audience, or whom the lower-caste middle classes may speak for, is based on the public exchange that followed in the form of letters written to the columnist in 2001–2.[18]

To put the discussion in context, it needs to be said that this columnist's writings are marked by some aggression and a polemical quality not unlike that found in many political interactions between *dalit*s and non-*dalit*s since at least the time of B. R. Ambedkar, the preeminent leader of the *dalit*s from the 1920s to the 1950s. This is hardly surprising, given the gross inequality and evident lack of respectful communication between the two sides over a very long period. It is important to note, however, that the aggression and polemic are hardly restricted to one side when it comes to open political argument.

Among the hundreds of letters written to the columnist, a large number come from *dalit* youth asking advice or seeking help—to get a job or a loan, to find ways of continuing their education, to learn more about Ambedkar or Buddhism (the religion that Ambedkar and his followers embraced in the last year

18. I am grateful to the columnist for his kindness in letting me read, copy, and use all the letters he received. The translations from the Hindi in the quotations that follow are mine. After prolonged consideration, and consultation with the columnist, I have withheld his name and other particulars to prevent the personalization of the larger issues at stake here.

of Ambedkar's life and that other *dalit*s have embraced since), and to express their own desire to contribute to the struggle to change society. There are numerous letters from Muslim readers, which is unsurprising, given the contemporary ascendancy of an aggressive right-wing Hindu movement dominated by the upper castes. In the face of the latter, targeted and vulnerable communities like the Muslims have sought to build new political coalitions and found in the *dalit*s a potentially important political ally.

For these non-*dalit* well-wishers as well as for *dalit* readers, the columnist is more than just a writer. He is also, immediately, a leader—of the *dalit*s and of other oppressed communities. *Dalit* correspondents condemn as traitors those *dalit* intellectuals, officials, and other professionals who fail to represent the interests of the *dalit*s at large, and they call on the columnist to continue to lead the struggle to raise *dalit* consciousness and to establish *dalit* power. The high stakes involved are indicated in the very forms of address: highly reverential in the case of letters from supporters and sympathizers and often downright abusive in letters from opponents.

For some of his supporters or "followers," the columnist is no less than "today's Ambedkar" and, in one case, "more courageous than Ambedkar." For opponents, usually from higher castes (including some from the "backward castes" that have also suffered the indignities of lower-caste status but that, having been classified technically as "clean" castes, do not see themselves as *dalit*), he is anything from "Mr. *Dalit*," "Mr. *Dalit*ji," "*Dalit* Maharaj" (or "Almighty *Dalit*"), "The all-knowing one," and "The Pimp of the *Dalit*s" to "Mr. Pig," "Mr. Shit," "Dog," "Goonda," "Suvar," "Chamar," "Dom," and so on. More than a few of these letter writers, from "respectable" backgrounds as they frequently aver, heap sexual abuse on the female relatives of the *dalit* columnist, freely using obscenities that they would normally keep out of their "middle-class" homes.

Some of the letters warn the columnist of anthrax attacks if he does not stop abusing his upper-caste readers, that is, if he does not stop criticizing the Hindus and their religion, dividing the nation, forgetting the duties of Indian citizens, forgetting what "we" have done for "you," and forgetting his—inherited—place. Some of the same letter writers, while abusing and threatening the columnist and his relatives, also demand the publication of their letters and warn of untoward consequences if publication is refused. This exhibition of unashamed aggression on the part of the "respectable" must give us pause. The threat of open violence, accompanied by the use of lower-caste names such as Chamar and Dom as insulting epithets to humiliate the addressee, an act that is now a cognizable offense under Indian law, speaks of the arrogance of power; of groups that hold them-

selves above the law and other requirements of "civil" society, at least in their dealings with certain kinds of people; and of unshaken belief in the upper castes' right to rule.

Two of the letters make the point succinctly. One says, "Upar vale ne tumhein banaya hai hamari seva karne ke liye" (The Almighty has made you [precisely] to serve us). The second states, "Hamare joothe tukde khane vale, hamare bailon-bhaison ke gobar mein se dane nikal kar khane valon, hamare mare hue jaan var khane vaalon, hamare saamne tumhari himmat kaise hoti hai hamare khilaf baat karne ki" (You who eat the crumbs left over on our plates, who eat the grains you pick out of the shit of our cattle, who eat the remains of our domestic animals that have died, how dare you speak out against us [or, for that matter, in our presence]).

I could cite many more examples of similar abuse and arrogant statement of inherited privilege. Instead, I will conclude by referring to a much more polite intervention that nevertheless restates the dominant upper-caste and upper-class belief in the appropriate place of the *dalit*, or any other insurrectionary voice, in the order of things and in the business of development. This particular letter comes from a Brahman male who lives in Delhi, on the eastern (less salubrious) side of the river Jamuna. Addressing the *dalit* columnist in the most respectful traditional terms ("Honorable Mr. — —," "respectful salutations"), he writes that he has been reading the column on "the problems of the *dalit*s" for some time and recognizes that "somewhere," in some important way, "what you say is true." However, he asks,

> Will you tell me whether you think of yourself first as a *dalit*, [a member of] a so-called low caste, or as an Indian? If the answer is "Indian," then I plead with you not to divide this nation up further, physically or psychologically. In my view you are capable of lifting up the *dalit* community of the entire country through education, thereby contributing to the progress of the nation. You must endeavor to lift them up out of the feeling of being *dalit*s or so-called low castes, and make them [conscious of being] Indians. Let them know that we are not Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, we are nothing but Indians and will remain [nothing but] Indians.

The correspondent then expresses his opinion against affirmative action or constitutional provisions for the reservation of a quota of educational and political positions for people from lower-caste backgrounds. "There are other ways of lifting up [the *dalit*s]." "Reservations . . . harm the nation."

This "sympathetic" reader, too, believes in the necessity of the columnist's

playing the role of leader, not of course of the country at large, but of his community: "You are capable of lifting up the *dalit* community" and thereby "contributing to the progress of the nation." Note the unselfconsciousness of the question "[Do] you think of yourself first as a *dalit* . . . or as an Indian?"—a question periodically asked in India of Muslims but not of upper-caste and upper-class Hindus. For the latter *are* the nation, invisibly and axiomatically. In this context India and Indians are taken to be abstract and unmarked categories, while *dalit*s are posited as a concrete and identifiable group, with identifiable but sectional problems: "minorities" that must not forget that theirs are, in the end, *sectional* problems, minor in comparison with the universal problems of India and of humanity at large.

What is posited here is a choice of political constituency, which is in itself a negation of choice. What the *dalit* columnist must do is represent *dalit*s *and* India. Indeed, he can represent India only *as* a *dalit*—acknowledging where he comes from, representing the community that is his from birth, and recognizing its given yet gradually improving place in the society.

It is instructive to set the response elicited by the Delhi columnist—"[Do] you think of yourself first as a *dalit* . . . or as an Indian?"—beside certain reactions to the popular 1980s American television series *The Cosby Show*, about an eminently "normal" African American family of successful professionals, reveling in loving parenthood, education, and affluence, and to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the story of a black girl's quest for a sense of self and independence in Florida in the early twentieth century.

Hurston's 1937 novel was panned, in many quarters, for turning black life into a minstrel show, in part because of her use of accents and vocabulary common among African Americans in the 1920s. At the same time, while it was applauded for its engagement with contemporary issues of gender and sexual politics, it was criticized for "its inability to speak to the local, particularized politics of its time"—that is, for not adequately addressing the specificity of the black experience in the post-Reconstruction South.[19] The *specificities of black experience* were again an important part of the debate about Bill Cosby's television show, although in this instance the charge was more that the show was "not black enough." Several critics declared that the series "obscured the issues of class and race" and

19. Carol Batker, "'Love Me like I like to Be': The Sexual Politics of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the Classic Blues, and the Black Women's Club Movement," *African American Review* 32 (1998): 199; Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

reinforced facile and unhistorical arguments about how African Americans, like anyone else, could make it in modern-day America if they had the will.[20]

There is a common thread here. Numerous demands are made of the African American novelist and television producer, as of the *dalit* columnist. Each of these artists and professionals must write/create for *everyone*. They must entertain, inform, and educate by universal — which is to say, "our" — standards. At the same time, they must represent the *dalit*s or the African Americans, first and foremost. In truth, they cannot represent anyone else. They must not imagine that they are, or might in some peculiar combination or circumstances be, the "mainstream" of society.

It is not only the wider society (the establishment or the media or a self-proclaimed popular "common sense") that calls on the successful individuals of once-enslaved communities to remember what "we" (the mainstream, upper-caste Hindus, upper-caste whites) have done for "you." Members of these disadvantaged communities, too, urge the professionals not to forget where they come from, to stay close to the community's experience, and to foreground it whenever possible. They must be true citizens of India, the United States, and the world, *and* they must be true to their subaltern origins. Even the privileged position of black professional women workers in late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century America did not relieve them of their "obligation to work in the public sphere," Stephanie J. Shaw notes. "Not to use their advantages for the advancement of the race was deemed selfish and even traitorous."[21]

The Issue of Naming; or, Passing

On the issue of naming and thus of how they "represent" themselves, again, the ex-slave middle classes have been confronted with a choice between inhabiting two very different identities — an insistently political one, that of being *dalit* or black, and an apparently nonpolitical one, that of being middle-class. The result is a history of prolonged struggle, not only in the matter of naming the community to which they belong but over the question of assuming appropriate surnames and first names, too.

20. Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1992), 7. See also Leslie B. Inniss and Joe R. Feagin, "The Cosby Show: The View from the Black Middle Class," *Journal of Black Studies* 25 (1995): 692–711.

21. Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 119.

In the general perception of the *dalit* and the African American struggles, it is the question of naming the wider group or community that has drawn attention. The distance traveled in this quest for self-definition and self-respect is indicated by a list of some of the names given to these political assemblages or adopted by their spokespersons: Negro → colored → black → Afro-American → African American → people of color → ___, in one case, and outcastes → untouchables → depressed classes → Harijans → Scheduled Castes → *dalit*s → ___, in the other. The last few terms may be unfamiliar to readers outside India. Harijans, or "children of God," Gandhi's appellation for the untouchable castes, is now angrily rejected by *dalit* militants as patronizing and vapid. "If we are children of God, whose children are you?" some of them have asked sarcastically. Scheduled Castes (which refers to the list or schedule of untouchable castes drawn up for the Government of India Act of 1935 and included, with modifications, in the Indian constitution of 1950) is a category still commonly used even by *dalit* professionals and political leaders. However, *dalit* is the preferred term of self-description among *dalit* activists today. Literally meaning "crushed," "broken," or "downtrodden," it has since its use by the militant Dalit Panther movement in the 1970s become a term of self-assertion, reclaiming a millennial history of exploitation and humiliation and of resistance to it.

In India, there has been widespread debate over local caste names as well. The question gained urgency with the inauguration of decennial census operations from the later nineteenth century when, in a classic colonial move, colonial officials attempted to classify all castes and subcastes in India in a universally agreed hierarchy. Along with other low castes, many *dalit* groups struggled to improve their "official" status and to gain better access to economic, social, and cultural resources through a claim to new names, new "traditions," and new histories.[22]

22. The census commissioner of Bihar noted in 1911 that the flood of petitions asking for a change of names and a higher place in the caste order was such that the weight of the paper alone amounted to 1.5 maunds. Both Hindu and Muslim castes were involved, claiming "higher" caste names, such as Singh, Sharma, Khan, and Ansari (*Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, and Sikkim, Part 1*, vol. 5 of *Census of India, 1911* [Calcutta: Government Press, 1913], 440, 446). On *dalit* attempts at redesignation, see, e.g., Owen Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability: Social Mobility and Social Change in a City in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969); Andre Beteille, "Caste and Political Group Formation in Tamilnad," in *Caste in Indian Politics*, ed. Rajni Kothari (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970), 245–82; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in Twentieth-Century Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest, and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1997); Saurabh Dube, *Untouchable Pasts: Religion, Identity, and Power among a Central Indian Community, 1780–1950* (Albany: State University of New

Today, in an ironic reversal, many lower-caste and lower-class groups are seeking recognition as *dalit*s (ex-untouchables) or "backward castes" in a new stage of political struggle generated by amplified state promises of affirmative action for historically disadvantaged groups.

The question of how to name the community, whether the larger assemblage of ex-untouchables or *dalit*s or the smaller local-caste group, is one part of the struggle. *Dalit*s from different walks of life continue to use inherited caste names — which can be deprecatory and humiliating in many contexts — in everyday descriptions of particular habitations and their populations, while describing themselves as *dalit*s or Buddhists or Ambedkarites in other situations. However, in line with the earlier struggle to upgrade themselves in the existing caste hierarchy, many *dalit*s argue that such caste names in fact derive from a history very different from that commonly associated with them. Thus, as a retired *dalit* bureaucrat said to me, "Chamar [the most common North Indian name for groups associated with leatherwork and shoemaking] comes not from *chamra* [leather] but from Chinvar or Chanvar, names of lineages that once ruled this region."[23]

Among politically conscious *dalit*s, and middle-class *dalit*s more generally, there has been a parallel contest in the matter of surnames. The question here is one of social and political identification, in the sense of "identifying with" particular populations or assemblages. The struggle over surnames has therefore been a central issue in the matter of passing, or being accepted in a class or collectivity that is not one's natal community or supposed social group.

The requirement of surnames is fairly recent in many parts of the world.[24] In the case of India, surnames became mandatory in colonial times. They were needed for bureaucratic identification and classification and for admission to schools and other civil and military institutions. Until recently — and in parts of small-town and rural India to this day — children and youth were known as the sons or daughters of so-and-so (the father), with the latter additionally identified by caste, especially in the case of lower-caste people. The surnames subsequently

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York Press, 1998); Vijay Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom: The Social History of a Dalit Community* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Chinnaiah Jangam, "Contesting Hinduism: Emergence of *Dalit* Paradigms in Telugu Country, 1900–1950" (PhD diss., University of London, 2005).

23. Balwant Singh, interview by the author, Saharanpur, January 11, 2007. Such recasting of history was very much part of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century struggles for dignity and self-respect.

24. See James C. Scott, John Tehranian, and Jeremy Mathias, "The Production of Legal Identities Proper to States: The Case of the Permanent Family Surname," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44 (2002): 4–44.

adopted (or assigned) often derived from caste names or what were thought of as the traditional occupations of particular castes, although some alluded to geographic origins, administrative or professional position, learning, and proficiency in various trades.[25]

In this context, upwardly mobile *dalit* individuals and families, struggling against the discriminatory caste order, often assumed "neutral" surnames, tied to places of origin or to unmarked administrative or social positions such as "headman" or "soldier," that did not immediately reveal their caste background. In other places, they adopted appellations hitherto used by higher castes or by people belonging to other religious traditions, such as Christians, Sikhs, or Buddhists. In many instances, they dropped surnames or titles altogether and lived with a single name. Sometimes this was supplemented by a middle name like Lal, Kumar or Kumari (meaning "son or daughter of" or "junior" member), or Ram or Prasad (something like a "gift from the gods"), which would become a surname in turn. Recently, as the *dalit* struggle has grown in strength and militancy, scores of *dalit* activists have embraced once derogatory caste names (Dusadh, Pasi, Jatav, Mahar, Chambhar, and the like) as surnames.[26]

The aspirations and anxieties reflected in the struggle over surnames are found in the choice of first names, too. For generations, people of the lowest castes and classes were barred from taking elegant, classical, high-sounding, "respectable" names, which was seen as an entitlement of the higher castes and classes. A well-known example is provided by the story of the great *dalit* writer Daya Pawar. Until some time after the publication of his extraordinarily successful autobiography, *Baluta*, he was known as Dagdu (rough stone, pebble) in the Mumbai slum where he lived with his parents and family and was denied the use of his given name, Daya (compassion).

Chindhi, Chapta, Kalu, Buddhu, Bhukhya, Kachda, Natki, and Rondhu (roughly: rags, flat-nosed, blackie, the stupid one, the hungry one, dirt, etc.) are other examples of the derogatory names commonly given to *dalit*s by village elders or by family members who wished to stave off the evil eye or simply believed that this was the order of things. Recent social and political changes have brought

25. Among certain groups, especially in southern India, the first name of the father came to be used as an individual's second name.

26. For the purposes of this exploration, I have constructed more than a hundred family trees or, more accurately (given the nature of the evidence), partial family trees of *dalit*s in northern and western India. My information comes from interviews, supplemented by autobiographical writings and "fictional" accounts. I have kept footnotes to a minimum in the following pages to protect the identities and confidentiality of my informants.

about a significant shift in attitudes. A new generation of educated, middle-class *dalit*s has begun to use more respectable, self-respecting names, resonant with history and promise.[27] *Dalit* activists have also published lists of appropriate, classical names, with rich literary and philosophical allusions, from which less educated *dalit*s can choose. Often these names come out of the Buddhist tradition, and sometimes publications include lists of suffixes that may be used to make the girls' or boys' names grander and more "meaningful" and "beautiful."[28]

Inevitably, the invocation of different signs of the "modern" and the "traditional"—the Western, the classical Indian, the progressive—has a gendered aspect to it. If *dalit* boys are named after Buddhist kings (Kanishka, Ashoka) or given the names of the Buddha himself or of his distinguished disciples (Siddharth, Rahul, etc.), *dalit* girls in the same (non-Christian) families are occasionally given "Western" names, often the names of flowers (Jasmine, Rose). Sometimes these are assigned in place of, at other times in addition to, meaningful Indian names: thus two school-age daughters of a *dalit* bureaucrat in Nagpur are named Ekta (unity) Rose and Samta (equality) Rose.

However, the question of the surname has been the matter of greatest contention for *dalit* middle-class individuals and families. As I have noted, family names are among the clearest indicators of caste background in this deeply caste-conscious society. The following example from eastern Uttar Pradesh, in northern India, illustrates the point well. The oldest living male member of one *dalit* family, who became a middle-rank district police officer in the 1960s, used the surname Ram throughout his career. Ram was the tag added to the names of men in the family in his father's generation, all of whom worked as farmers, craftsmen, and laborers in the village. By contrast, all the younger male members of the police officer's family are educated urban dwellers, and they go by other surnames.

The police officer gave his younger brother, fifteen years his junior and now a prominent *dalit* ideologue, the surname Prasad. His four sons use the surnames Chandra, Kumar, and, in two cases, Pracheta. The name Pracheta, first adopted by the older of these two sons when he went to college in Delhi, is particularly difficult to place in the existing social order, since it has no established caste connotations. In this respect, it is unlike Ram, Prasad, Chandra, and Kumar, which are commonly used by *dalit*s today, without being exclusive to them. A cousin

27. As the life story of an educated, rural *dalit* youth in a major Gujarati novel pronounces, "Yesterday's [rough sounding] Somnaa, today's [far more respectable] Somanlal, will be [the highly respected!] Solomon tomorrow" (quoted by Joseph Macwan at the conference "Dalit Subaltern Sahitya," Delhi, December 12, 2003).

28. For one example, see *Bauddha stri-purush namavali* (no publication details, 1991).

of the police officer has taken the upper-caste surname Sahni and prefers like many other middle-class *dalit*s to use the initials of his earlier name in place of a personal name: D. R., the *R* in this instance standing for Ram. He took the name Sahni after a young niece had adopted it on entering high school near Delhi. Another cousin of the police officer continues to use the surname Ram, but his two daughters have adopted Chaudhri, traditionally meaning caste or village "headman" and now used by individuals and families of many castes, high as well as low, in many parts of India. In two generations in this one family, seven surnames are used.

Another example, of *dalit* professionals now living in Britain, should suffice to round off my argument about the struggle over passing. It comes from the family of a husband-wife team of eminently successful medical practitioners. The grandfather of the male doctor migrated from Punjab in the 1950s and built up a small business in the British Midlands before returning to Punjab, where he set up in the style of a well-to-do farmer and philanthropist in his home village.[29] The father worked in a foundry and as a small-time trader in England and educated all his children, of whom the doctor son is the most successful. The father has also been active, since his retirement from full-time work a few years ago, in promoting the Ambedkarite segment of an increasingly international *dalit* movement.

The doctor son and his wife, born and bred in the United Kingdom, were given made-up first names and use the surname Kumar. They now have three children, all boys. When it came to naming these children, their paternal grandfather suggested that alongside the lovely Irish, Greek, and English first names chosen for them by their parents, the boys should each have a second name that spoke of their Indian heritage, such as Tagore and Jawaharlal. Consequently, the eldest boy is called Aidan Ambedkar Kumar. As I was being given this information by the parents and grandparents, Aidan, then aged seven, walked into the room. When I asked him his name, he said Aidan. I asked whether he had other names, and he said Ambedkar, without hesitation or diffidence. I then asked, foolishly perhaps, whether he knew what this name meant. His grandfather immediately intervened, stopped the exchange, and ushered the boy out of the room, saying to me quietly that they did not really want the children to "know about all that."[30]

The duplex vision articulated in this exchange says something about the pre-

29. There, his fellow villagers would still have treated him as "untouchable," but given his wealth, they could not, at least not openly.

30. Interview by the author, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom, July 16, 2006. The names have been changed to protect the interviewees' privacy.

dicaments of the subaltern middle classes, which may be symptomatic of the history of the modern middle classes in general as they have aspired to higher social position and respectability.

Escaping Subalternity

I have suggested that the modernity and universality of the middle classes were affirmed in one way or another as the middle-class idea traveled from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century western Europe, through nineteenth-century (colonial) North America, to the colonized countries of Asia and Africa, and finally to what are seen as predominantly underclass populations, such as the African Americans of the United States and the *dalit*s of India. There are specific reasons, however, why the cultural and even class markers of the subordinated — the markers of being backward, black, ex-slave, or ex-untouchable, still tied to the underclasses, *still* the underclass — have been particularly difficult to shed in the African American and *dalit* cases.

The story of what I have called the subaltern middle classes may be placed alongside the history of the mainstream middle classes in the Asian and African colonies. As they consolidated their position, the latter moved from their native towns into the European enclaves, frequently advancing to take them over completely after the attainment of independence. The *dalit* and the African American middle classes emerged at a later stage, without an equivalent exit route. With no sovereign state or territory of their own, they continue to suffer from disguised as well as overt discrimination long after the formal establishment of independence and democracy. They remain tied, as well, to lower-class communities, cultures, and histories and even to marked residential localities that more invisible yet once subaltern groups have escaped more easily. Thus the Irish, the Jews, and the Italians in America were not identified by color; perhaps more important, like Muslims or Christians in India, they have been seen as more differentiated internally and not as *naturally*, *necessarily*, belonging to the lowest classes.

The situation of the ex-slave middle classes may be compared, again, with that of the modular European or even the North American white middle class. The latter are urged to build their culture and morality and peace of mind in the secluded home: the modern privileges privacy, individuality, and family as the site of improvement, of the individual, and of society at large. By the mid-nineteenth century in the United States, as Mary Ryan notes in her work on the middle classes in upstate New York, a good deal of popular literature was pushing the "responsible breadwinner, no less than . . . [the] loving mother, into a

narrowing social universe, one even more solitary than privacy—the domain of the self, the individual, of 'manly independence.'"[31] The *dalit* and the African American middle classes are rarely allowed the luxury of such privatized retreat. "Among African Americans, marriage itself was political," writes Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, "a testimony to capability as piercing white eyes peered through domesticity, searching for degeneracy."[32] If the subaltern middle classes celebrate individual achievement, privacy, and the nuclear family, they must do so in the interests of the larger family, the community that nurtured them and gave them birth.

One last narrative, of an African American life, concludes my consideration of this history and the unusual position of the subaltern middle classes. It is the well-known story of Anatole Broyard, the narrative of a life of passing that differs from and yet parallels some of the *dalit* examples cited above. The protagonist was a prominent literary critic, a regular book reviewer for the *New York Times* for two decades, and "one of literary America's foremost gatekeepers" in the 1970s and 1980s.[33] In living his life, and performing his editorial duties, Broyard felt that he had to make a choice between being an "aesthete" and being a "Negro." As he told close associates on more than one occasion, he wanted to be appreciated as a writer, not as a *black* writer. Light enough to pass for white, he did so for most of the period during which he was an acknowledged and prominent literary figure. His own children did not find out that he was black until he was on his deathbed, when his wife insisted on the need to tell them before he died. Others, even among some of his closest friends and associates, found out only at his funeral, which his sister and other relatives (many of them much darker than he was) attended.

The mode of passing is very different in the African American and *dalit* cases. Yet the issues at stake are painfully similar. As regards his willingness to "live a lie" all his life, Broyard appears to have put forward the following argument, to himself and to those friends who knew his background and with whom the question came up in his later years. "Why *shouldn't* I [and my children] pass for white if I can?" he asked, given the discrimination, disadvantage, and even humiliation that they would suffer simply for being black.

At the same time, we know of the charges of betrayal and the feelings of guilt that are articulated time and again in commentaries on the ex-slave, ex-untouchable

31. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 147, also 238.

32. Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 18.

33. This account is based on the chapter on Broyard in Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (New York: Random House, 1997), 180–214. The quotation is from 180.

middle classes and their relation to their "native" communities. Henry Louis Gates Jr., for example, writes of the anxiety "of having been false to our people, of having sinned against our innermost identity."[34]

The subaltern is an inescapably political category. So, I suggest, is the subaltern middle class. Individuals and families who might answer to this description are endlessly subjected to the query "How can you forget your people?"

"Why *shouldn't* I pass for white if I can?" Broyard is said to have asked. If that question captures one aspect of the history of a stigmatized, subaltern middle class—gays and lesbians in the military ("Don't ask, don't tell"), the promising schoolchild from a working-class background, the Jewish entrepreneur in 1930s and 1940s Europe—an equally serious challenge appears in the question "Why *should* I pass for white, even if I can?" There are no "correct" answers.

34. Gates, *Thirteen Ways*, 127. (However, the category of "our people," and that of "our innermost identity," is hardly so self-evident. In the African American and *dalit* cases, as among other colonized populations, not to say everywhere in the modern world, these categories continue to be politically produced.)

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